

## TIPS FOR TEACHERS & STAFF: HOW TO SUPPORT STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

For many students experiencing homelessness, school is the only place of stability in their lives. Teachers play a crucial role in creating a classroom environment that is safe and supportive for all students, especially those who are highly mobile and have experienced the trauma that often accompanies homelessness. Here, we provide information and strategies that teachers and support staff can use to support the educational success of students experiencing homelessness.

### Who is considered homeless?



The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal law that protects the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness. It defines “homeless children and youth” as any student who lacks a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” That includes students who are sharing the housing of others due loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of adequate alternative accommodations; living in emergency shelters or transitional housing; and living in cars, campgrounds, or bus stations. This definition includes migrant children who are staying in these situations. Special protections also are provided for youth who are experiencing homelessness on their own.

### TIP: Know the Signs



Be familiar with common characteristics of students experiencing homelessness, including:

- Enrollment at multiple schools, lack of records, gaps in learning, poor/inconsistent attendance.
- Poor hygiene, unmet medical/dental needs, wearing the same clothes repeatedly, fatigue.
- Social and behavioral challenges, such as extreme shyness, withdrawal, or aggression; clinginess; difficulty with peer and/or adult relationships; poor attention span; anxiety late in the school day.
- Lack of participation in field trips and/or afterschool activities, lack of basic school supplies, inability to complete special projects.

### What core protections and services are provided for students experiencing homelessness?

Through the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act:

- Students who are experiencing homelessness can remain in one school (including a preschool), even if their temporary living situation is located in another school district or attendance area, if that is in their best interest. Schools must provide transportation.
- Students who are experiencing homelessness can enroll in school and begin attending immediately, even if they cannot produce normally required documents, such as birth certificates, proof of

guardianship, immunization records, or proof of residency, or even if they have missed application or enrollment deadlines.

- Students who are experiencing homelessness must be able to participate fully in school activities and access all programs and services for which they are eligible, including [extracurricular activities](#), credit recovery, special education services, school nutrition programs, language assistance for English learners, career and technical education, gifted and talented programs, magnet schools, charter schools, summer learning, online learning, and before- and after-school care.
- Every local educational agency, including charter schools that are local educational agencies, must designate a homeless liaison. Homeless liaisons have many critical responsibilities in the service of students experiencing homelessness, including identification, enrollment, ensuring access to early childhood education and other programs, and collaboration with community agencies.

### **What can I do if I believe one of my students is experiencing homelessness or is at risk of becoming homeless?**

Teachers can play a critical role in the lives of students who are homeless. While McKinney-Vento liaisons bear the local-level legal responsibility for serving students experiencing homelessness, teachers are well-positioned to observe and respond to student needs. Some strategies for providing support include:

#### **1. Learn more about the McKinney-Vento Act and connect with your local liaison.**



If you believe one of your students needs support, [contact your district's homeless liaison](#) about next steps (you should be able to find the liaison's contact information on your district website or SEA website). Ask your liaison for local resources, and read more about McKinney-Vento provisions [here](#).

#### **2. Create a welcoming climate and build trust with all students.**



Find time each week to check in with the student to assess unmet basic needs, offer encouragement, and recognize the child's talents and accomplishments. Pair new students with a "buddy" in the classroom or assign new students a "job" and encourage involvement in extracurricular activities. These personal relationships can be critical.

#### **3. Help to identify and support students experiencing homelessness.**



Many students are uncomfortable telling people at school about their homelessness and asking for help. Be attentive to the stigma of homelessness and avoid using the word "homeless." Especially if you notice any of the warning signs listed above, use descriptive language and ask questions to better understand a student's housing situation. For example, ask students and families, "Where would you go if you couldn't stay here?" "What led you to move into this situation?" If appropriate, refer the child and his/her family for supportive services and housing assistance in your community.

**4. Take a trauma-informed approach.**



The experience of and events leading up to homelessness can expose students to violence, abuse, hunger, trafficking, and other traumatic experiences. Allow students to hold on to personal possessions in class, keeping in mind that any possession may be the child's only one. Provide well-defined transition procedures from one activity to another and give choices when appropriate to counter the loss of control experienced in their lives.

**5. Stabilize basic needs and support full participation.**



Make healthy snacks and/or hygiene supplies available. Ensure enrollment in the free meal program. (Homeless students are automatically eligible for free meals, and do not need to complete an application.) Ensure that the student has every opportunity to participate in school activities: contact the homeless liaison to find out how to provide school/project supplies, cover field trip fees, purchase uniforms, and meet other needs. Give students a clipboard to use as a "desk" when they leave school.

**6. Ensure classroom policies and procedures set students up for success.**



[Disciplinary policies](#) must take homelessness into consideration. Provide structure and adhere to a consistent daily routine and clear, concise rules. Plan assignments so children can keep up without having to take work home.

**7. Reach out to parents/caregivers.**



Because parents may not have regular access to a phone, create a communication plan. Send the family a "welcome" letter and/or invite them to visit the classroom. Ask if younger siblings need supportive services. Make sure parents know their family's rights.

**Sources:** [EHCY Fact Sheet](#), [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction: How Teachers Can Help Students Who are Homeless](#), [NYS-TEACHS Tips for Teachers](#)